

Nature and importance of the communication process in the workplace



Understanding the communication process in the workplace

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- Explain the importance of effective communication in the workplace

Communication is our way of getting information from one person to another. Effective communication is needed to ensure that the information is understood in the way it was intended to be. In any workplace this is important but especially within the NHS where this information could affect patient safety if not effectively communicated and fully understood. Without good communication colleagues may not understand procedures and may not be working in the same way. Safety rules and regulations may not be adhered to which could adversely affect patients or practice performance. Furthermore, if information is of a complicated specialist nature, ineffective communication may mean this is not understood or its importance realised by the recipient. Ineffective communication could lead to messages not being passed on and things being missed, errors, conflict and a reduction in workplace productivity. This could range from a minor error to a significant event. In Primary Care communication could involve various recipients from patients with disabilities through to consultants or other care providers so the methods of communicating need to be tailored to make sure that information is received and understood.

- Describe the stages in the communication cycle

The communication cycle starts with the sender. The sender needs to know what message they are trying to get across to others and have the

knowledge and understanding of their message to enable it to be understood by others.

The second stage is the message itself. The message should be clear and appropriate language needs to be used. Sometimes a message may need to be long and include large volumes of information, such as when communicating a policy, but at times a concise message is better to home in on the important points so they are clear, using for example bullet points.

The method of communication can be key whether this is written in letter form, a memo, email, text message or verbal communication one to one or in a meeting. A text message may be a great fast way to get a message to patients to let them all know a piece of information but if a patient does not use a mobile phone then they might prefer a letter. Some members of staff may never read their emails so a meeting with staff may be the chosen method of communicating in practice.

The next stage is the receiver. The audience with whom the sender is communicating needs to be considered when choosing the method to ensure a message is received, this also needs to be the correct audience. The content of a message should also be tailored to suit the receiver. A patient may not understand some medical terminology whereas another healthcare professional may need more in depth medical terms in communication. A message needs to be understood to enable it to be acted upon. This is the final part of the cycle - understanding. If the actual content of any message is not understood then the whole cycle has failed so language, tone, terminology, special needs all need to be considered.

- Identify possible barriers to communication in the workplace

There are three areas of possible barriers to communication these are organisational, interpersonal and physical.

Organisational barriers may be for example time. We may have information to give to staff but not the time to come together in a meeting to communicate this due to people working on different days or being busy in practice and just not having capacity to do this. Another barrier could be lack of communication between clinical and non-clinical members of a team in General Practice.

An interpersonal barrier may be a manager that is unassertive and doesn't perhaps make it clear that a message they want to get across is important and must be acted upon. The style in which a message is conveyed may also create problems if the language used cannot be understood by the recipient, be this due to the terminology used or even the language itself.

Physical barriers could include hearing problems. In General Practice staff may need to communicate with elderly patients that are hard of hearing and this can be a barrier when trying to convey information on the telephone. This could lead to patient safety issues.

- Explain how to overcome a potential barrier to communication

A potential barrier to communication in Primary Care could be disability. Disabilities that can affect communication can include hearing difficulty, learning disabilities and visual disabilities. In practice we have patients who are hard of hearing and wear hearing aids a way we have worked to help

communicate with these patients is by having a hearing loop fitted in practice. This is appreciated by patients as they can hear what staff members are saying to them at the reception desk. For patients with learning disabilities we give longer appointments to allow time for information to be given to them clearly as they may need more explanation, or clinicians to speak slower and this allows time for clarification that they have understood information given to them. Any written letters are tailored to these patients, with larger print, clear concise bullet points and language used that is appropriate for their level of understanding. For patients that have poor vision we do offer large letter printed letters in practice so that they can read the information we give them more easily. These are all ways in which we can attempt to make communication with these groups of patients more effective.

Understand the methods of communication

- Describe the main methods of written and oral communication in the workplace and their uses

In the workplace written communication methods include memos, emails, instant messaging and letters. The main method used is email. Email is a cost effective and fast way of communicating with one or more people within the workplace. Communicating via email means that one message can be sent to numerous people, the message can be audited and retrieved in future so recipients can revisit the message if needed. Attachments can also be included with emails so large amounts of information can be sent. The main advantages of emails are therefore cost, speed of delivery, being able

to reach numerous recipients, audit trail. But the disadvantages may include that the message is not read. Not all staff access their emails on a regular basis without prompting. The email may not be read if it is too long or includes information the recipient deems unnecessary. The email may not be understood by the recipient and the sender may not know if the message has been opened, read, or understood. It is important an email is sent to the correct person, is written in a way they will understand with key points in bold, or in sections and that a time frame is given for a reply if required.

With regards to oral communication this may be over the telephone, one to one or in meetings. When information is needed to be communicated between members of the whole team in General Practice a good way of doing this is to have a meeting. Meetings are a good way of telling everyone a piece of information at the same time. The message needs to be presented in a way that is concise and with a content that can be understood by the audience. A meeting gives others the opportunity to ask questions or input ideas so can be very positive in the workplace. You are able to clarify understanding as it is face to face, you know that everyone has had that information given to them, has heard it and whether or not they understand it. Disadvantages could be that not everyone can attend the meeting, or that not enough time can be allocated to meetings, they can be hard to arrange on a regular basis and if you have information that needs to be communicated quickly it may not be possible to arrange a meeting in time to give that information. An agenda can help with the meeting format, minutes allow others not at the meeting to find out what was discussed, clarify points to those in attendance and keep a record of what was said.

- Identify the main advantages and disadvantages of written methods of communication

The main advantages of written communication are that this can be referred back to, it leaves an audit trail, it can reach many people whether by letter or email, and email is cheap to send. If sent via email messages can also be searched for using key terms so are easy to find if needed to be referred to again. E-mails can also be copied or forwarded to further recipients easily.

The main disadvantages of written communication are that the sender may never receive it – it could be lost in the post, or the email never opened. If written communication is lengthy the recipient may not read it all and if they do read it they may not fully understand it. When information is written the recipient cannot clarify with the sender what they mean so may not understand the importance or even the message itself. Written communication could also be misinterpreted or interpreted in a different way by its recipients.

- Identify the main advantages and disadvantages of oral communication

Oral communication may include meetings, one to one conversations on the telephone or face to face. The main advantages are that communication is two way and the recipient has an opportunity to ask questions or give their input, and the sender of the message can clarify that the message they are trying to get across is understood. This can also help understanding as the sender has chance to elaborate on parts of the information and if face to face can even get cues such as head nods to check the message is being

understood. Body language, gesturing and tone can also be used in to help with understanding or to make it known how important information is. Oral communication can also be a fast method to get information to people around you.

The disadvantages of oral communication may include finding time to have the conversation or meeting with the recipients, or things going off track. Some recipients may not listen and will not have something to refer to if the information is only oral, or may forget the information. Having no written record or audit trail is also a disadvantage as people may not recall all information or have a different interpretation and especially in a meeting situation not all staff may feel able to ask for clarification if they don't understand what is being said. Some people do find they understand or take in written communication over verbal.

- Explain how non-verbal communication can influence the effectiveness of oral communication

What is said in verbal communication is important but the message can be influenced by non-verbal communication at the same time. Communication experts have found that 7% of communication is taken from the words you use, 38% from your voice and 55% is from your body. The tone of voice used to communicate can influence effectiveness for example if someone uses a stern tone it may be perceived that they are angry and this may make the recipient take more or even less notice of information. Tone can also be used in a way to make people feel more at ease and enable them to understand information more easily and feel able to ask for clarification.

Body language may also influence whether information is communicated effectively. Eye contact can help maintain attention and interest as can facial expressions or head tilting, gestures with the face from both sides can show understanding or confusion. Hand movements can help portray confidence, annoyance or used to signal towards things as an aid in communicating. Open body language can be positive and help to make the person you are communicating with feel at ease, whereas folded arms can signal negativity or anger even. The recipient can nod or smile to show understanding whereas a frown may show confusion and allow the person giving information a cue to clarify or expand on what they are saying.

- Explain the value of feedback in ensuring effective communication

Feedback is an extremely valuable tool in ensuring communication is effective. Information is of no use if it is not understood by the person you are giving it to. Feedback can be used to check that the person understands by asking them if they understand and asking if they have any questions. It also gives chance to allow others to give their suggestions or ideas and this may have a positive impact on the workplace either through implementing these ideas successfully and making improvements or even as a way of team building and boosting morale. Feedback can ensure that all recipients of a message have interpreted it the same way and that the main points are clarified or given in summary and agreed upon. Non-verbal feedback may include cues such as nodding to show understanding. If communication was written then feedback could require a response from the recipient to show that this message was received and to clarify that it was understood and will

be actioned. Feedback in the form of a reply to an email will show the sender that their communication has been understood.

Be able to assess own performance in communication

- Assess own performance in a frequently used method of communication

I have been in my current role as Practice Manager for only 11 months. This was a new role for me at a new practice. Although I have been involved in meetings in previous positions it is only since starting in this post that it has been down to me to organise an agenda, lead and minute the full team, management, clinical and other meetings. I feel that when leading a meeting I do always have a clear, well organised agenda with the most important pressing matters first. I will always take the information to the right audience so for clinical protocols the clinical meeting, for matters involving everyone at the practice I will use the full team meetings. I do think the platform of meetings is the best choice to communicate with the team to allow discussion and for everyone to be told information at the same time.

However I have realised that I do add too many agenda items, so prepare too much information for these meetings and never get through the whole agenda. Meetings can be quite infrequent due to the busy nature of the practice, it is hard to organise times to meet and when they occur meetings can go off track due to input from other team members and discussions. I feel that I then rush and speak too quickly, not getting full clarification of understanding of my points. Trying to cover too many topics at speed may

cause not everything to be understood and it would be better to limit the number of topics so that they could be covered more appropriately. Once I start to feel rushed I know I talk too fast and the tone of my voice changes, I will also become more expressive with my hands and this reduces the effectiveness of my communication as it can become distracting.

However I do feel I have open body language and good eye contact with others in meetings. I feel I come across as approachable to allow others to ask questions. I do write up minutes of meetings so that there is an audit trail and also to allow myself and others to return to the items discussed and read the key facts or any agreements made.

- Identify actions to improve my own performance in communicating

In future I would like to improve my communication in meetings. My aim over the next three months is to do this by:

- Producing an agenda with 3-4 items maximum for a team meeting or if more needs discussing putting more time aside for a meeting.
- Producing agendas in advance with any supporting information that could be pre read being made available by email so that I can use the meeting to clearly and concisely go over key points, gather opinions and check understanding
- Ensuring that I speak more slowly and if there is more than one topic being discussed to work through these each on an individual basis until each is understood without rushing
- When producing minutes I have always lead the meeting and tried to take all the notes. I would communicate more effectively if not taking

notes during meetings and in future will assign this to someone else. I would still have overall responsibility for checking the minutes afterwards and make sure they are available to all staff for future reference and checked by everyone involved for accuracy.

- Try to summarise at the end of meetings before everyone leaves to clarify main points.

References :

- Thornfields training manual – Managing People with Confidence
- www.workplace-communication.com